

What is the Beautiful?

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Initial proposition:

Q: What is the Beautiful when it is mentioned in the texts and how far does the practice of loving kindness move along the path of the Buddhist meditation which leads us to the experience of Nibbana?

Answer:

You brought up a good question about the "Loving-kindness" practice and about where it culminates on the path to nibbana. Your question was, when we see the word 'beautiful' being discussed in the texts, what does 'the beautiful' refer to?

The "Beautiful" refers to Loving Kindness and is equivalent to the Fourth jhana and this practice is one part of four Brahma Viharas. The Brahma Viharas practice is sometimes called the practice of "Breaking down the Barriers" in the commentaries and it supports the meditator's progress very well while moving on down the path to the full liberation and the experience of Nibbana.

It is long overdue for me to do another examination of the sutta which reveals your answers in a little more detail. Why don't we go over it from the beginning to find out exactly how far one can go while practicing Loving-kindness first, OK?

We'll use the text translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi from "The connected Discourses of the Buddha, a translation of the Samyutta Nikaya" published by Wisdom Publications. Sometime. Once you had established a strong practice, I would suggest you get this book so we can work on things together in the future. It is available at Amazon.com .

The text for this sutta begins on page 1607. It is found in The Great Book (Mahavagga) Chapter II 46 Bojangasamyutta; Connected Discourses of Enlightenment- in V The Discussions- Sutta # 54 (4) Accompanied by Loving-kindness.

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Koliyans, where there was a town of the Koliyans named Haliddavasan. Then, in the morning, a number of monks dressed and, taking their bowls and robes, entered Haliddavasana for alms. Then it occurred to them: "It is still too early to walk for alms in Haliddavasana. Let us go to the park of the wanderers of other sects."

Then those monks went to the park of the wanderers of other sects. They exchanged greetings with those wanderers and, when they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, sat down to one side. The wanderers then said to them: "Friends, the ascetic Gotama teaches the Dhamma to his disciples thus: 'Come, monks, abandon the five hindrances, the corruptions of the mind that weaken wisdom, and

dwell pervading one quarter with mind imbued with Loving Kindness, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility, without ill will.

Dwell pervading one quarter of the mind with Compassion, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility, without ill will.

Dwell pervading one quarter of the mind with Altruistic Joy, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility, without ill will.

Dwell pervading one quarter of the mind with Equanimity, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility, without ill will.'

"We too, friends, teach the Dhamma to our disciples thus: 'Come, friends, abandon the five hindrances, [them repeat the same over again.]' So, friends, what here is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the ascetic Gotama and us, that is, regarding the one Dhamma teaching and the other, regarding the

one manner of instruction and the other?

These other ascetics are asking about the Buddha's teaching on the "Brahma Viharas" which is a practice composed of four parts, mainly, Loving-kindness, Compassion, Altruistic Joy, and Equanimity. This is really a good question they ask the monks here about 'what in the world is the Buddha doing that other practices were not doing' at the time he was teaching?

Those monks neither delighted in nor rejected the statement of those wanderers. Without delighting in it, without rejecting it, they rose from their seats and left, thinking, "We shall learn the meaning of this statement in the presence of the Blessed One."

Here these monks went directly to the Buddha to ask him firsthand what is the difference in the way he is teaching so they would be able to explain in future times to others! They took their alms bowls back to where they ate and had their meal and probably rested for good digestion and then afterwards, they went to find the Buddha. They told him the entire story of what had taken place and asked him to make a clear reply. At the top of page 1609 it continues on and I will break it down a little bit so you can understand it more clearly:

"Monks, when wanderers of other sects speak thus, they should be asked: 'Friends, how is the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal?

How is the liberation of the mind by compassion developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal?

How is the liberation of the mind by joy developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal?

How is the liberation of the mind by equanimity developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal?

Being asked thus, those wanderers would not be able to reply and, further, they would meet with vexation. For what reason?

Because that would not be within their domain. I do not see anyone, monks, in this world with its devas, Mara, and Brahma, in this generation with its ascetics and Brahmins, its devas and humans, who could satisfy the mind with an answer to these questions except the Tathagata or a disciple of the Tathagata or one who has heard it from them.

Now here we are with the Buddha and he is letting these monks know that the answer to these questions does not lie in those other traditions. [in other words all meditation is NOT the same and we can't say that all jhana is the same either]. They do not have the answers for these questions. Knowing the Buddha, through other sutta texts and stories, and how curious and investigative he was by nature during his six year search when he was yet a bodhisatta, one can pretty well figure that he tried those other traditions before saying this. As we are told in these stories, he had tried those other traditions and it just wasn't there that the answer lies. He continued his search for the way to liberation from the suffering and to fully understand many other things along the way.

You know, this is where Faith comes into the picture in Buddhism. Faith in Buddhism is not blind. The Faith here is that faith we put in the Buddha that he was telling the truth and you and I do not have to go through what he went through to figure this out if we just follow his instructions without changing them. But many, many people don't have this faith and instead, they jump all over the place trying to figure things out going tradition to tradition struggling with political correctness and any number of other things and no one seems to want to go right to the source anymore and just do what the guy said to do! I don't know about you, but I feel pretty safe in saying that if someone found something and then taught it for 45 years and left a heap of instructions, then we should examine those first and not what someone later said they mean and most especially when no one can tell you where the arahats are today?

You know, that was one of my issues when I began to practice. It's a reasonable question because Americans have been working with Buddhism for over 50 years now. So, where are the arahats?

The answer is right here It says right here in the scriptures that this practice he did was easily accessible, easy to do all the time, with benefits and results that happen right away in our lives. And he described those results that should be happening in many places in the suttas.

Then, why would people go to a book about meditation that doesn't do that? That isn't readily accessible,

that doesn't bring immediate results etc? Over time I discovered that people were just not going to the right source. It's still here, available, with immediate benefits and results. You have to know where it is and HOW to test it for yourself.

BTW- The thing that springs up for us here in this sutta is that the Buddha is using the 4 Noble Truths once again as a tool for his investigation training if you look closely. We are shown here how the 4 Noble Truths, all of them or a part of them, are a viable pattern of investigation to follow in order to figure things out!

For instance, the questions are right here:

What is Loving-kindness? What is Compassion? What is Altruistic Joy? What is Equanimity? These demonstrate the First Noble Truth being used just like with "What is Suffering?"

Then we are examining within our practice what is the Cause of Loving-kindness, Compassion, Altruistic Joy, and Equanimity?

During our practice we will experience the cessation of formations and this is the Third Noble Truth and so we get to look at a pure mind state.

Lastly the Buddha talks about the path to witness the arising Factors of Awakening within each level of the Brahma Viharas. Then, the point of culmination is observed as you go down the path using this method of meditation, and this, is the Fourth noble Truth.

In the sutta, the Buddha moves on to precisely examining the destination of each level, the culmination, the fruit of it, and the final goal of these states along the path to the liberation of the mind.

He is demonstrating the "uninterrupted practice " that must take place during this investigation to see clearly all that he is describing. This is why we do retreats. We retreat so that we will primarily put our efforts and attention into experiencing this very deep level of meditation for ourselves.

In the sutta, the Buddha gets down to explaining the destination, the culmination, the fruit, and the final goal of each of the four stages of this practice which, little by little, is breaking down the barriers on the way to Nibbana. This is truly what the Brahma Viharas were all about.

And how, monks, is the liberation of the mind by loving kindness developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, and its final goal? Here, monks, a monk develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness accompanied by loving-kindness, ...[the enlightenment factor of investigation accompanied by Loving-kindness, the enlightenment factor of energy accompanied by loving-kindness, the enlightenment factor of JOY accompanied by loving-kindness, the enlightenment factor of Tranquility accompanied by loving-kindness, the enlightenment factor of concentration [collectedness] accompanied by loving-kindness, and the factor of equanimity accompanied by loving-kindness, based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release.

Here we are told that along the way to the ultimate liberation we have to experience the awakening factors. We need to know what they are, how they are used in the meditation and how they work together. The Buddha is telling us that if we practice loving-kindness we will experience these factors and fully come to understand them.

For the monks in the time of the Buddha, this was not an immediate thing to be done. So, to do this, in keeping with the ascetic lifestyle, these Noble ones went into seclusion, meaning that they went to a location in the forest where they could be in sequestered to retreat alone. While there, they were only getting food and involved in no other primary activity other than meditation. They did not go out of the area for the phone. Nor did they go to the library, of which there were none, to do research and think. They did not move from place to place or communicate with other people while doing this precise in-depth work of meditation. They only followed cooperative rules and proper logistics of supporting each others living there

Q: Isn't the SECLUSION here the type of seclusion you practice in the midst of all the distractions and not necessarily physical seclusion?

A: For us today, yes, it could be that the word seclusion can mean this. That could be true. But at the time within the Banyan trees in the mighty forest there a monk would sit alone and would remain secluded as possible from all disturbances to do just this observation work.

As they developed the practice, they became disenchanted with the outside world and then they practiced with a dispassionate attitude towards everything.

Q: What do you mean by this?

A: Well, for instance, all food was considered "energy" that would sustain them to continue their practice. There was no choosing a cuisine but rather they accepted whatever they were given. They were supported by the surrounding people in a given area. They relinquished 'making decisions about anything' and mixed their food together in a bowl, whatever was received, and ate it at the appointed time each day.

Then they rested and then they continued their meditation for the afternoon. They neither reached for or pushed away any arising phenomenon they experienced at any of their sense doors. They did not analyze it. They simply let it be, let everything fall away to simply arise, be there, and then pass away.

They practiced to recognize and then not Crave anything because they were experimenting on how to let everything go and let go of all tension and tightness in their bodies and minds. They took an impersonal perspective on everything happening, and practiced ceasing of as much Clinging as possible.

Q: Is this the beginning of CESSATION? Why wouldn't it be cessation of craving?

A: Actually this is the level where habitual tendency to crave and to cling has been greatly reduced. To live like this is a practice not to submit to the tendency of "I" like it or the "I" don't like it mind. This is where the training leads one to a shift of tendency.

[if you do not Crave, you will not cling. This is what they were gradually discovering] So they practiced letting go of anything arising. They recognized any thought arising and abandoned it [released] it and each time this occurred, they then relaxed ALL tension in the body and the mind, smiling lightly, lightening mind, as they were returning to their object of meditation and continuing on again. Sound familiar?.

Q: Yes it is familiar - but where in this sutta does it say that?

A: All suttas don't tell us everything. A modern error is to try to take one sutta and believe it alone has the answer. But, the monks who were listening here to this discussion were speaking on particular points here. They had already integrated RIGHT EFFORT [the 6 R's] into their practice. They were practicing a lot like we are learning here in retreat.

We have to remember that this sutta is about how far you can go towards the supreme goal when using the Brahma Viharas as your primary meditation.

They had relinquished their possessions and then primarily pursued the meditation, ardent and resolute with Loving-kindness as their object of meditation to see what happened next! They encouraged each other as they went along. Obviously this was done over a period of time. This is why the monks and nuns seek the Noble Supra-mundane Path. It puts us in a position to develop the meditation, totally committed to full understanding, time and then we shift into developing ways to preserve and teach this to others.

Lay persons found much relief learning to do the practice too while using it in their daily lives, finding a large degree of relief. Remember too, at that time they were not reading and thinking in the same ways as we do today. They did this practice by listening, then sitting and observing, then contemplating what had happened, reporting to a teacher and that's how they figured things out through personal experience.

The Buddha goes on here to explain how the monk meditated,

If he wishes, 'May I dwell perceiving the un-repulsive in the repulsive,' he dwells perceiving the un-repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the un-repulsive and in the repulsive,' he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the un-repulsive in the repulsive and in the un-repulsive, ' he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the un-repulsive in the repulsive and in the un-repulsive,' he dwells perceiving the un-repulsive therein. If he wishes: 'Avoiding both the un-repulsive and the repulsive, may I dwell equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending,' then he dwells therein equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.

Here in the sutta, you get a clear picture of the meticulous investigative work the monk does in the meditation as he goes along. He may spend a day on each part of the above until he is at ease entirely within himself about that frame of Loving-kindness before moving on to the next phase. He is experimenting with the level of equanimity that is moving into the level of dispassion. He is observing how all attachment and aversion can diminish and then pass away.

It continues on:

Or else he enters and dwells in the deliverance of the beautiful. Monks, the liberation of mind by loving-kindness has the beautiful as its culmination, I say, for a wise monk here who has been penetrated to a superior liberation.

There is a commentarial opinion that goes to great lengths to explain that 'the beautiful' here means that the monk now uses a kasina in order to jump into the formless states but the sutta doesn't talk about this at all and one can reasonably suspect the writer didn't do the exercise himself to see what happens but rather assumed this is what they did.

If you practice for yourself, following the instructions precisely as you have heard them in the Satipatthana sutta and the Anapanasati sutta but applied to the Loving-kindness meditation, then you are likely to realize that the loving-kindness will carry you through the 'aware' jhanas just as the Buddha was practicing into some very deep states. He was not talking about Absorption here. HE is talking about observation with a clear awareness with complete understanding.

The sutta goes on here:

"And how, monks, is the liberation of the mind by compassion developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal? Here, monks, a monk develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness accompanied by compassion...the enlightenment factor of equanimity accompanied by compassion, based on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release.

If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the unrepulsive,' he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein... If he wishes: 'Avoiding both the unrepulsive and the repulsive, may I dwell equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.' Then he dwells therein equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.

Or else, with the complete transcendence of [gross] perceptions of forms, with the passing away of [gross] perceptions of sensory impingement, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that 'space is infinite,' he enters and dwells in the base of infinity of space.

Monks, the liberation of mind by compassion has the base of infinity of space as its culmination, I say, for a wise monk here who has not penetrated to a superior liberation.

Q: Any words on how the equanimity of the Brahma Viharas is related and different from the enlightenment factor of equanimity?

A: This sutta sits in the Connected Discourses on the Factors of enlightenment and this IS describing that level of "Equanimity". Yes.

Up to this point, we are being told that Loving-kindness goes to the Fourth Jhana and with it develops a very strong and stable form of Equanimity. Now, we see Compassion reach into the base of Infinite Space as the sutta moves on:

"And how, monks, is the liberation of the mind by Altruistic Joy developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal? Here, monks, a monk develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness accompanied by Altruistic Joy...the enlightenment factor of equanimity accompanied by Altruistic Joy, based on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the un-repulsive,' he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein... If he wishes: 'Avoiding both the un-repulsive and the repulsive, may I dwell equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.' Then he dwells therein equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending. Or else, by completely transcending the base of infinity, aware that consciousness is infinite,' he enters and dwells in the base of the infinity of consciousness.

Monks, the liberation of mind by Altruistic Joy has the base of the infinity of consciousness as its culmination, I say, for a wise monk here who has not penetrated to a superior liberation.

Q What is superior liberation?

A: Superior Liberation would be that liberation that is permanent and does not slip! Such liberation has reached a level of automatic Release without any more volition about it ! AND the unwholesome ceases arising all together.

Here, we find that Altruistic Joy goes as far as the base of the Infinity of Consciousness as its culmination.

Now, this should not be believed but, rather, you should test it! Try it. You'll see for yourself. Through personal observation in meditation, it will be shown to you.

Q: You tempt me! This seems a natural to me since I have long thought and advocated a "middle road" in reacting to events - in delightful happenings to consider the downside and not get over elated and in tragic events to see the "silver lining" - to be equanimous to everything - though I didn't use that wording. Are you actually recommending this? The meditation practice seems quite different in detail from the instructions in loving kindness meditation as presented by Bhante. - Can both methods be done together?

A: There is no difference. This is only a graduated level of the same meditation. Upon reaching the Arupa jhanas (Immaterial Jhanas) one continues on but the activity of any arising phenomena is occurring at the microscopic level now, almost not at all. Mind is very still, very calm and clear.

"And how, monks, is the liberation of the mind by Equanimity developed? What does it have as its destination, its culmination, its fruit, its final goal? Here, monks, a monk develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness accompanied by Equanimity...the enlightenment factor of equanimity accompanied by Equanimity, based on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. If he wishes: 'May I dwell perceiving the repulsive in the unrepulsive,' he dwells perceiving the repulsive therein... If he wishes: 'Avoiding both the un-repulsive and the repulsive, may I dwell equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending.' Then he dwells therein equanimously, mindful and clearly comprehending. Or else, by completely transcending the base of the infinity of consciousness, aware that there is nothing,' he enters and dwells in the base of nothingness.

Monks, the liberation of mind by Equanimity has the base of nothingness as it's culmination, I say, for a wise monk here who has not penetrates to a superior liberation.

End sutta text.

So there you have it. This answers how far Loving-kindness and the practice of the Brahma Viharas can go? Equanimity culminates at the point of the "base of nothingness"!

So many people don't know this. Many never look into a whole sutta or if they do and they have the wrong working definitions for mindfulness and meditation and therefore they can't seem to understand what they are reading.

When you do discover how far the Brahma Viharas will go then you realize that perhaps this practice of loving-kindness is not a practice to be isolated or to be put on the back burner, so to speak. It is not a small practice. Indeed it was magnificent in how far it could go and how well it could be carried with a practitioner so that they could continue to train the mind.

This practice is mentioned many more times than the breath meditation within the texts too. It seems obvious that it was meant to be embraced and used as a primary practice. It is a VERY powerful tool for helping ourselves and helping others physically and mentally. It leads us straight through the doorway to peace and is onward leaning towards Compassionate service without emotions getting in the way.

From the base of nothingness, one can then enter into the state of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception. Then, when conditions are right, you will fall over into a state of No feeling and No perception which is called Nirodha Samappada and that is the highest mind-state of Cessation. In that state there is NO CRAVING, pure mind..

At that point one can experience 'all distractions are destroyed by seeing with wisdom' and this means that you will see clearly all the links of how suffering arises and then how it ceases. After that you will experience the state called Nibbana.

Discussing some differences here.

Obviously presenting the practice of loving-kindness in this way is not the norm today. You are not likely to find this other than in this little booklet, but, the suttas preserve this information and it is still possible to understand all of it. People tend to present Loving Kindness in a very fast progression without explanation and so we miss experiencing the power that people can develop by practicing in this way.

You may say, well, this is such a nice practice, that doesn't make sense.

That's just the way of things right now but, they can change. Nothing has to stay the same and certainly not this method of teaching Loving Kindness. We should open ourselves to possibilities that there might be a practice in the texts that really does result in the descriptions left for us.

With a resolute gradual approach, this practice develops in this kind of progression of power which naturally evolves as one goes along. You do not make this happen. It happens naturally. Each time the practitioner is examining the 'repulsive or non-repulsive' etc. that is a way of testing the stability of the equanimity within that level before moving on to the next level.

As you leave one level the feeling changes a little bit and it moves. Here is where the practitioner experiences a shift in the feeling. The beginning location of the feeling will change.

For instance, at the point where you are practicing loving-kindness you will reach the fourth jhana and then, you will feel a significant shift as you just barely enter into the base of infinite space. The feeling changes and you will have to explain to the teacher how it changed. This change indicates to the teacher it is time to treat the meditation with compassion at that level. But we do not stop. We do not intentionally have to say, OK. Now we are going to work on Compassion. It's not like that. It's a progression you go through and the power is getting stronger and stronger all the time naturally.

By presenting a very fast presentation of the brahma viharas or using a set of meditation phrases like a mantra, the energy never develops. You personally feel good that you took the time to do the exercise, but there is no power realized in that way.

It's all about feeling. But if you rush through it, this isn't clear. I have witnessed this kind of dilution. But at the same time, we need to remember that this is because of the source of the instructions. If the teacher has put their faith in a commentarial work to explain this practice, rather than going to ask directly into the suttas, this is what happens.

So to answer the original question here of 'what is the 'beautiful', it is at the level of strong, firm Equanimity which is the condition of the state of the Fourth Jhana and this is where the loving-kindness begins to change in feeling. As it shifts it is a sign you are moving on into Compassion where more observation work is to be done. I will not tell you how it shifts. You must come to the teacher and tell him so he will know when to guide you to the next step and so on.

Hope this helps you to understand a little better what the Beautiful is and how the evolution of this wonderful practice naturally develops.

Much Metta and smiles to you,

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